

FATAL FRENCH.

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WOMEN make society. If a society is without charm, without grace, but chattering and imitative, like a colony of monkeys, it is because the women of that society lead the most vulgar life, and ape the modes and manners of a race foreign to them, and with a different past. The education of girls, which subordinates the social and historic examples of their own race and literature to the social means of an alien and artificial society, must be considered as fatal to the precedence of English and American, while it fails to graft a pure example of the best product of Continental society.

The young ladies of our New York schools are taught French to the sad neglect of English; and the strange and best result of a fashionable boarding-school is to graduate young ladies who can write and speak the French with more correctness and grace of expression than the English language; for, in the French of good society, slang is ignored, if not unknown. The young lady knows that French is the social passport in the most fashionable world, and, urged by vanity, she acquires a mechanical facility in the use of it, and remains quite indifferent to the charm and wealth of our mother tongue.

Our English is the English of our households. If our mothers and sisters, our wives and daughters, speak it carelessly and badly, all of us, not interested in language and literature as a special study, speak it badly and carelessly. Judge how important are a just and fine appreciation and use of English in the education of a young lady! And what has she gained as a social influence, if she uses the language of Racine, and has not acquired a true perception of Shelley? And what play of expression in French is solicited and evoked by the objects and incidents of English or American social life?

The charm, the grace, the harmonious intercourse of Frenchwomen, the fame of French *salons*, were made by French women and men conversing in and writing their own language with exquisite grace and purity of expression. Benjamin Constant and Madame de Staël were supreme among many who had the literary sense and the Gallic taste in almost equal measure. The language of conversation, which has had so much more influence on the written language in France than in England or America, was made supple, and delicate, and brilliant, by the influence of women. In what parlor of New York shall we go to hear our language expressed correctly without pedantry, with grace without affection, with vivacity without slang, with freedom without carelessness? In what young ladies' school are the strength and beauty of the English language appreciated? On the contrary, what blunders, what irksome labor, what mental disgust, what repetition and monotony, yes, and what thefts, are not suggested by "English composition"!

Are our English language and literature too virile for the feminine mind? Is Chaucer too homely and racy, and Shakespeare too comprehensive, to engage the model young lady? Is Spenser too ideal, and Shelley too unreal? Is Milton too involved, and Johnson too sonorous? And does the young lady of the period shrink from every expression but that of the shallow current of conversational French, which gives importance to trifles and varnishes the dull facts of common life?

It is a pleasure to hear a Frenchwoman speak. Her accent, her vivacity, her well-trained and modulated voice, her mobility and naturalness, her art of concealing art, attract and enchant a stranger's ear. Is the American girl likewise taught to value her natural means of expression? Is she impressed with the beauty and charm of her native language? Is she instructed in the use of that exquisite instrument of the mind and heart, the language of her race? Outside of her French exercises, how trite, how careless, often how vulgar, is her expression! You could not think she had ever read and appreciated a pure example of English; that she had ever understood a master's use of language. Her conversation gives no suggestion of the supreme masters of expression. The deficiency of the artistic sense is felt even in our use of language, and in the habitual influences which determine our choice of language. For the rare influence of a Hawthorne, a Poe, an Irving, an Emerson, we have, every Sunday, the often threadbare diction of the pulpit, and once a week the tepid phrases of popular newspapers—language without grace and empty of life—or, oftener, the language of the daily paper, which is chiefly composed of the phraseology of politics and business; all alike "flat, stale, and unprofitable," in an æsthetic society, which is the ultimate society of every fine civilization.

The true object of the education of girls is to form a social being of varied and engaging qualities. The moment education has placed man on a level with material obstacles, and enabled him to conquer the obstructions of an harmonious and peaceful life, we ask for pleasant intercourse, for agreeable diversion, for a charming society. If our girls have not been taught to appreciate and meet our highest social wants, our society remains at a low level; if they have not been taught the most sacred and beautiful elements of their own language, what compensation does mutilated and mechanical French offer as a means of fine social intercourse?

The chief value of a foreign language is, that it enlarges our mental experience, and reveals another intellectual horizon. A new literature is a new domain opened to us. But of what value is that new country of the mind, if we have taken but little exercise and a sluggish breath in our native air? If our mind is stiff and inflexible in English, if it knows but little of the broad pastures of the paternal estate, will it thrive in and explore a foreign one? Does it not necessarily remain the same dull, inert being as at home, and, at best, lead a parrot-life in the social cage called good society?

French is well taught only when English is taught with equal *empressment*. And, in teaching French to young ladies, is the whole of French literature laid open to their adventurous and fearless minds? Are they not introduced to a literature that has no correspondence with the customs and traditions of their own life? It is a literature thoroughly liberating; a literature that necessarily emancipates the social being; a literature which gives the zest of things that are ridiculous or disgusting to the English mind, but which are seductive to, and absolved by, the *sentiment du cœur* of the Frenchman.

Bigots and croakers may inflame their minds with the awful possibilities of fatal French for the young lady of the period; we are not troubled by that aspect of the question, because we trust human nature; but French is fatal to our girls when they study it with more zest than English, and neglect the language which should be found the most choice and charming on their lips, not the most slovenly and awkward, enlivened with slang. Throughout New England young ladies use slang in spite of the beautiful forms of expression of a Hawthorne; in New York slang is perhaps equally obtrusive, and the expression of the feminine mind and heart is far from having the sweetness and grace of Irving, or the beauty and magic of the exquisite women of Poe's stories. Is French fatal to them? Or are the English language and literature feebly taught on Murray Hill, and on the banks of the Hudson?